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## 5. A Vision for Cambridge

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Development is a heated subject in Cambridge, even if its pace has cooled considerably. It arouses passions because it is fundamentally about the kind of place we want to live in, even if the explicit focus is on site specific skirmishes of use, design or building bulk. The growth policy process has tried to pose the most basic question: what kind of Cambridge do we want now and in the future? To answer necessitates summoning our vision. A vision for Cambridge is of necessity broader than any single neighborhood or architectural style. Cambridge is the sum of its parts, but it is also more. Good planning is nourished by the attempt to see the city as a whole, and to take a long view.

Past planning visions proposed big schemes (highways, high-rise apartments and office towers). They typically assumed that the old should give way to the new, that bigger was better, and that continued growth would solve most problems and enable communities to sidestep fundamental choices and trade-offs. The vision was a radical one, in the sense of radically uprooting and replacing what existed in the built environment.

This vision is different. It is conserving, respecting the past, while not suggesting that land uses in Cambridge remain frozen or static. It builds on the recognition that Cambridge works and human diversity works. The current mix of urban form, scale, density and mix of uses is worth sustaining and enhancing, both in existing neighborhoods and commercial districts, and in the older industrial areas.

This vision also differs from traditional arguments about development. It recognizes that resources for urban development, both environmental and fiscal, are limited. Rapid development in the 1980s had measurable consequences for the natural and human environment of Cambridge and the surrounding region. Problems such as air quality, traffic congestion and subtler changes in the human-scaled built environment suggest that there are real limits to the pace of growth. The slowing of development in this decade has brought severe negative consequences as well: a declining commercial tax base, threatening the level and quality of services the city can offer, and shifting the tax burden to homeowners.

Fiscal constraints imposed by Proposition 2 1/2 a decade ago increase the pressure to rely on physical development to serve local needs. Rising joblessness and fewer new job opportunities also harm economic health.

Recognizing these realities means moving beyond arguments about the quantity of growth -beyond advocating "more growth" or "no growth" -and focusing instead on quality, or "better growth." Better growth maintains the essential qualities which give Cambridge its unique character. There is no quantitative standard or litmus test to determine what is sustainable development. Rather, there are different facets of the city's character which must be weighed in any development decision. These can be summarized as the built and natural environment, the social character, and the fiscal and economic climate of Cambridge. Policy directions implied by each are suggested below:

### **Built Environment**

Maintain the human scale and texture of Cambridge, building on rather than replacing a dense urban form which works. Strengthen distinctive neighborhoods and protect special environments, such as historical and cultural districts. Repair and renovate the housing stock and infrastructure, and revitalize tired shopping districts. Design buildings of durability, excellence and suitability of use and materials for their context.

### **Natural Environment**

Recognize that natural resources are finite, just as new land for building in the city is limited. Environmentally "sustainable" development addresses environmental costs now, rather than deferring them to future generations. Growth policies for reducing car use, thus lowering air pollution, or protecting and expanding green spaces, typify this approach, as do resource conserving design principles.

### **Social Character**

Retain the city's diverse range of races, cultures, viewpoints and income groups which gives it its unique character and fuels its cultural and economic vitality. Promote a diversity of housing, jobs and public spaces. A



focus on people, as well as land, demands an enduring commitment to education and training for the work places of the twenty-first century.

### **Fiscal Climate**

Consider the fiscal and economic consequences of development policies, tempering regulation with incentives where possible. Maintain the revenue base necessary to serve a diverse population and ensure a decent life for residents. Cultivate and retain local enterprises, based on innovation and knowledge generated by the institutions. Maintain an environment friendly to such activities, and the informal settings and amenities which nourish them.

These facets of the city's character are inter-connected; none exists in isolation from the other. Economic development to sustain City services and job creation need not threaten the quality of the natural and built environment. Ideally, development should be environmentally sound in all of its phases, from selection of raw materials to processing to use in society to waste disposal and ultimately to reuse and adaptation to new uses. Overly constrained growth could harm the city's social and economic diversity. Finding the right pace and quality of development requires weighing all elements of the city's character together and, at times, making trade-offs. It also requires finding new revenue sources to fund City services, and reexamining the level of services and the way they are delivered.

Viewing these elements as interdependent reveals that trade-offs are not always inevitable, however. They are also resources which can amplify and strengthen one another. For instance, a well-trained and well-housed work force will in turn strengthen the city's commercial base, helping provide the revenues needed to govern effectively. Sustainable development conserves the built environment as well as natural resources. Building on

the city's mixed use character, where appropriate, enables more residents to live near their jobs, and to walk to small, neighborhood-oriented businesses, reducing car dependence and easing congestion.

Finally, the city needs development decisions which are sustained for the long-term by broad consensus. It should be clear that individual elements of this vision, and the policies to carry them out, sometimes stand in contradiction to one another. Conflicts over land use are inevitable, given multiple goals and needs, scarce land and divergent viewpoints. Since all needs cannot be met at every site, compromises must be made. Integrating diverse goals such as job creation and limited auto use, or environmental quality and social equity requires negotiation and hard choices. A sustainable



agreement

is one that results from the informed involvement of diverse participants. This requires keeping the process flexible and open to ongoing dialogue, to ensure that all decisions are timely, fair, consistent and well-debated.

Bearing these principles in mind, what kind of Cambridge can we hope for in the coming decades? The following are elements of a vision of a sustainable Cambridge in ten or twenty years:

- A vibrant, stable population of diverse races, cultures and viewpoints. New cultures continue to arrive; some rise to positions of public prominence.
- An environment where families with children can thrive. Parks, housing, schools and child care and other supports make the city a good place to raise families.
- Good housing available to a wide spectrum of income levels and households (singles, families with children, older people, etc.) Hundreds of units are renovated yearly by neighborhood-based organizations. More residents are experimenting with cooperatives, co-housing and other forms of ownership which share costs, community services and benefits.
- Significantly reduced automobile traffic. Walking, carpooling, public transit, bicycling and jitney trips are the norm. Employers and families compete annually to reduce single occupant car trips by the greatest percentage. All corners of the city (and adjoining cities) are stitched together by bicycle lanes and paths.
- A national model for community energy production, pollution prevention, and recycling. Grassroots organizations and the universities, churches, and other institutions cooperate on sustainable forms of transportation, heating, waste reduction and food production and distribution.
- A system of beautiful, well-maintained and accessible parks and open spaces. Landscaped pedestrian parkways knit the park system together in the style of Frederick Law Olmsted. Every neighborhood has volunteer groups pitching in to ensure clean and safe parks.
- A renowned system for training and retraining workers for emerging industries and successful careers. Youth combine courses, work ap-



prenticeships and community placements; older workers learn new skills and act as mentors to youth.

- A thriving economic base, anchored by new health, environment and communications-based industries, home-based and storefront businesses, and the academic institutions. Cambridge continues to attract national attention for its climate of innovation and entrepreneurship.

- Vital and distinctive retail centers serving neighbors, students and regional customers seeking an ethnic meal, a rare paperback or fresh fish and produce. Local retailers, hurt by higher rents in the 80s and early 90s, make a comeback and thrive.

- Strengthened and stabilized neighborhoods which retain their distinctive flavor. Connections between neighborhoods are improved by open space and transit improvements, as well as by increased cooperation on a variety of issues.

- A model for effective citywide design review. Widespread design review of new projects occurs in both traditional districts and in the former industrial areas, such as Alewife.

- A system of comprehensive, high quality city services. New revenue sources and forms of service delivery lessen the city's dependence on property taxes and physical development to fund services.

- An ongoing, successful process for addressing growth and development concerns. Local government expands shared responsibility for growth with the nonprofit and private sectors. All interested parties engage in continued debate about the appropriate pace and quality of development in the evolving industrial districts, and their impact on nearby residential areas.